Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter One
4. Chapter Two
5. Chapter Three
6. Chapter Four
7. Chapter Five
8. Chapter Six
9. Chapter Seven
10. Chapter Eight
11. Chapter Nine
12. Chapter Ten
13. Chapter Eleven

Allegiances

FieldClan

Leader:
Harestar - a dappled brown she-cat with large, amber eyes

Deputy:
Seedscatter - a brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Medicine Cat:
Shrewtoe - a dark grey she-cat with dull, copper eyes and an inky black tail
Apprentice: Nutpaw

Warriors:

Beetlefang - a jet-black tom with striking green eyes

Birchtail - a cream tabby she-cat with darker rings around her tail and many white patches, along with silvery blue eyes

Grassfoot - a black tom with long, white legs and green eyes
Apprentice: Blackpaw

Finchfur - a golden tabby tom with yellow eyes

Thistleflower - a pale brown ticked tabby she-cat with soft green eyes

Wheatfur - a brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Cloudleap - a pure white tom with short fur and blue-green eyes

Stoneclaw - a grey tabby tom with a white throat and green eyes, one of which is blind

Owltail - a long tailed solid grey she-cat with large amber eyes

Yellowfeather - a golden she-cat with white toes and copper eyes

Apprentices:

Blackpaw - a solid black tom with amber eyes

Nutpaw - a pale brown tabby tom with darker grey stripes and a small tail

Queens:

Petalpatch - a grey tabby she-cat with yellow eyes
(Mother of Finchfur's kits, Brackenkit and Dustkit)

Goosewing - a brown tabby she-cat with copper eyes
(Mother of Cloudleap's kits, Silkkit, Windkit, and Maplekit)

Elders:

Coldpatch - a black and white tom with striking yellow eyes

Kestrelfeather - a long-furred brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Prologue

I am the spider
and you are the fly.
Our web slowly builds
whilst your clan slowly dies.
My silk thread has promised us
Strength or Demise
By next summer's moon
spider will take
its prize.

———

Seedscatter woke with a start, his head buzzing with static. His pelt felt hot and thick, much too heavy to be his own. Humidity hung like molasses in the air, and his thoughts trailed behind him, sluggish and incomprehensible. But he couldn't sleep, not now.

His dream... If only he could remember it in greater detail. Words jumbled up in his head as the images slowly became muddier and muddier until the entire thing had blended together into an indiscernible mess. He could just barely recollect the sleepy, rhythmic words of some prominent figure before the picture faded from his mind entirely. He couldn't shake the feeling of *things* burrowing through his fur, however. Maybe it had been a nightmare; he had always hated insects of any kind, even the harmless ones. They made his pelt feel itchy just watching them crawl around with beady eyes and long, spindly legs.

Seedscatter needed a walk. He simply needed some fresh air to clear his head. Then he might be able to return to his nest. As he stirred, so did the body next to him. His sister's similar tabby pelt bristled as he stood, and her shaggy head lifted from the moss, eyes blinking drowsily.

Seedscatter restrained a huff, bending down to lick his sister's head comfortingly. "Where... Where you goin'?" She asked blankly, her

voice clumsy and slow.

"I'll be right back," Seedscatter whispered, effectively dodging the question. He didn't actually know where he was going to head off to - probably just an aimless stroll around the territory, not going too far, or anything.

But Goosewing seemed to have different plans. She ambled to her paws, muttering an apology to the light-sleeper in the nest next to hers. "Let's go," she meowed, and Seedscatter knew there would be no diverting her attention now - it didn't take much to convince Goosewing of something, even if that wasn't your end game.

The siblings picked their way through the den, tails hovering far above sleeping cats so as not to brush against the pelts of others. They had already disturbed one cat on this starless night, and both were convinced in their ability to refrain from waking the entirety of FieldClan.

Soon, the dusty clearing that served as the camp bled away into bleached grasses, taller than a cat was long and thickly set if you knew where to look. In the spots around camp, however, the grass was sparse and thinning, and barely reached Seedscatter's chin in height. In tickled his whiskers as he walked by, making him sputter out a mix between a cough and a sneeze (a snough, if you will).

Goosewing laughed, flicking his shoulder with her tail. "You alright, there?" She asked, her tone laced with humor.

Seedscatter could do nothing more than make faces at her back as she padded ahead, her eyes straining to see past the cloud cover that blanketed the sky.

"Maybe we'll get some rain," she murmured, her voice nearly inaudible over the chaotic thrum of crickets in the distance. They could have been huddling in the cats' ear fur, for how loud they were being.

"Shrewtoe sure seems to think so."

"Shrewtoe couldn't tell an omen from a juniper berry these days,"

was Goosewing's harsh response. Seedscatter cringed at her hateful words.

The pair remained silent for a moment, just basking in the nightly choir as it continued it's feverish music. The camp was a mere memory in the distance, disguised thoroughly by the field.

"I had an odd dream," Seedscatter said suddenly. Goosewing turned to him with a curious look in her eyes.

"Go on," she meowed, motioning with her tail.

"I-I can't really remember all of it, but bits and pieces stick out. There were bugs, lots of bugs; little black beetles, and shiny centipedes, and clicking cicadas..." The night seemed to go quiet as he trailed off, though the silence was quickly filled, and it was as if the falter had never occurred. "And a yellow spider." At that moment, just as Goosewing had parted her jaws to speak, a draft of cold air spilled over the litter-mates. A prickle of unease settled at the base of Seedscatter's scruff.

"Like the little jumping ones that make webs in the barn?" Goosewing asked gingerly, as if afraid to bring on another frost-tipped wind.

Seedscatter shook his head rapidly, his eyes a bit wild. "No. No, this one was huge. It was bigger than my paw-" he held up his left forepaw. "-and it was... At least I think it was... Was speaking. To me."

Both cats went silent for a long time.

Then, finally, "What did it say?"

Seedscatter sighed. "I wish I could remember."

Silence, yet again. Seedscatter's whisker twitched, his ears flicked, and his paws danced over the sandy soil. His sister's lack of a response was getting to him.

"Well," Goosewing started again, slowing down until she came to a stop. "It was just a dream, wasn't it?"

Seedscatter murmured his assent

"Then what do you have to worry about?" she let her tail rest on his shoulders. As much as he wanted to, the tabby tom did not shake off her dismissal. "Besides, there are better things to be putting your mind to work on.

"Such as?" Seedscatter asked curiously, already knowing the answer before it came toppling out of his sister's mouth.

"Cloudleap and I are expecting kits!"

The dread that he felt in the pits of his stomach could not have been blamed on the fresh kill he had eaten earlier that day. Seedscatter was starting to realize that the dream couldn't have just a dream, either. A storm was brewing. There would most certainly be rain.

Chapter One

Goosewing's kits were born in the heat of a summer day, as healthy and kit-like as they should have been. No extra eyes or long black legs in sight. But as his dreams grew steadily worse, the fear that gripped Seedscatter's heart felt tighter and tighter, restricting the blood that shouldn't have left his feet unsteady and his mind unsure.

The voices that spoke to him had told him terrible things, of death and fire and floods that would warp his home and leave him alive but terribly alone. They told him of his sister's kit, how she would be his spider, his adversary, and his end. But now she was just a rag doll that stretched out in the hay like a piece of fresh kill.

Silkkit.

That's what they had named her.

The tiny, squirming white she-kit that was to be the end of the clans as they knew them. Seedscatter knew he shouldn't have been angry at something that had only just entered the world, but he couldn't help it. He was furious.

He had visited the nursery a few days after the birth, as Shrewtoe was letting Goosewing rest up before visitors saw the kits. There were three of them: Windkit, Maplekit, and, of course, Silkkit.

It would be about a moon before they even opened their eyes. Seedscatter was betting that Silkkit's would be yellow - a dirty, hazy, black-rimmed mustard color that would make his throat burn with emotion. Just like his own.

Seedscatter used to love the deep color of his eyes, flecked with copper and gold framing two black slits. Now he despised them. At least one good thing came out of the lack of rain; there were no puddles that he could glimpse himself in, making the fur rise on his scruff. He would be the laughing stock of his clan: behold, the

deputy who fears his own reflection!

The spider had been making an appearance in many of his dreams, enough for him to start remembering the taunts and jeers that the little bug had said to him. And now with Silkkit... It was just too much to handle.

Now, Seedscatter made his way along the southern border, his nose pressing into Finchfur's tail. Behind him, Stoneclaw's own nose was trained on Seedscatter. The method of staying together was devised many moons ago, as the grasses were easy to become lost in. It was simpler than traveling by scent alone.

The need for border patrols came and went with the seasons, it seemed. Though FieldClan was the only large group of cats in the area, loners liked to pass through, bringing tales of far away places to tell to young, impressionable minds. When food became plentiful, rogues made their own camps, and it was the patrol's job to drive them off, especially if they were being hostile. For now, all was quiet, and the borders had been marked.

"How are your sister's kits doing?" Finchfur asked, his tone friendly.

Seedscatter refrained from letting out a huff of annoyance. "I haven't seen them in a few days, but they were alright then," he meowed curtly.

Finchfur seemed to take the hint, however, and they treaded through the field in silence for a moment. To their right, something small scuffled through the undergrowth before finding shelter within its burrow.

"I'd love kits some day," Stoneclaw said behind him, his voice wistful. "But Thistleflower isn't keen on giving up her warrior duties." The grey tom shrugged, face skimming off of Seedscatter's tail for a moment before it was brought back down.

"Kits would be nice," Finchfur agreed. "What about you, Seedscatter? How would you feel about a couple of children to carry on your lineage?"

Seedscatter didn't really know how to answer that. "Sure." He might as well satisfy the toms. He didn't want to have to answer a bunch of unnecessary questions.

Stoneclaw purred in agreement. "I've always liked the prefix 'Wren'," he meowed. And the conversation went on like that for the rest of the trip home, Seedscatter only participating when he was directly asked a question. Otherwise, he brooded over Silkkit.

There had to be something he could do to get rid of her. He couldn't kill the thing, no, the blood would forever be on his paws. Goosewing would be mortified, and even if she didn't find out, someone eventually would. The only cat who might understand would be Shrewtoe. She knew all about omens and prophecies and the like. Maybe she could decipher it.

Seedscatter hated this feeling, the constant on-edge anxiety that flooded his thoughts and turned his legs into jelly. He shouldn't have to fear a kit! If anything, the kit should fear him. He probably shouldn't give the kit a reason to fear him, though. It wouldn't look very good to the others.

As he settled into his nest later that day, pelt ungroomed and filthy (he might actually have to wash it tomorrow), Seedscatter tried to calm his thoughts. He had gotten a poppy seed from Nutpaw, easily faking a headache, and could already feel the effects of the tiny black sleep-enhancer.

Eyes shut tight, Seedscatter willed his exhaustion to roll over him like a rain cloud, surrounded by the thunderous purrs of his denmates and the thin veil of humidity in the air.

Unfortunately, every thunderstorm comes with lightning.

Seedscatter shuddered, feeling the water soak his fur and drip from his pelt in rivers and streams. But he had to keep going. Something was pushing him onwards, discouraging his need to rest underneath a bush or tree. He didn't know what the force was looking for, but it must have been important.

White light flashed above his head, lighting up everything in a sharp clarity for half of a second before going dark again. A booming clap of thunder came only a moment later. He was almost directly under the storm.

With little to no wind, the rain poured directly down onto him, feeling, at least to Seedscatter, like thousands - no, *millions* of tiny thorns digging into his pelt. Each drop was a hiss that fought to be heard. His yellow eyes cut through the haze, if a bit fitfully, to keep his insistent paws from stepping on anything harmful. He was becoming impatient, blinking angrily into the distance. Though the forest was too dark to see anything, Seedscatter could make out the towering pines when lightning cut streaks of gold through the clouds. The branches were completely bare, snaking tentatively towards the sky like claw marks in sand. Each movement and creak seemed to cry out to him, though he could hear no words beneath the roar of water.

"You shouldn't judge this place. A storm like this has already taken it s toll on you."

Seedscatter spun around, fear piercing deeper than even the largest raindrops could manage. "Show yourself!" He yowled, a drowned rat in the paws of a fox.

The laughter that followed wasn't really laughter at all. It seemed to pour from all around him, slushing in between his toes and burrowing in his fur. The noise itself *was* the storm.

"You won't like me," the shadows crooned, a detectable pout in its tone.

Seedscatter said nothing, lifting his chin defiantly. He wouldn't stand and be played with, not if he could get the smallest grab on the situation.

"Ever the stoic one, hm? Oh well. I tried."

Seedscatter squinted through the darkness, unable to make out anything. His eyes strained to pick up any movement at all, but the rain was just too thick.

Then, as if sparks had erupted from StarClan itself, light lit up the forest, and he could see everything. Yet, at the same time, Seedscatter could see nothing. He was drowning in light, suffocating in blinding heat, so hot it was cold. He felt like he was on fire, like every nerve was curling and fraying, and each of those frays was curling and fraying itself. He let out a cry of pain, but he couldn't hear himself over the blood roaring in his ears. It was too much, he had to escape, he needed relief from the stimulative torture.

"Do you see me now, uncle?"

And he did. Flickering on the edge of his field of view were two eyes, painted in the most unholy shade of black he had ever seen. His own, yellow irises glinted off of the gleaming surfaces, merging into the color he had grown to fear.

Scared of a color, some far away voice scoffed in his head. Who would have thought that he, deputy of FieldClan, would be scared of a *color,* of all things?! It was ridiculous.

But there were more pressing matters at hand. Those eyes were growing steadily bigger, taking up more and more space, replacing the empty white with swirling depths of malice and hatred. They swallowed the light and left something worse. It was a feat that Seedscatter would have deemed impossible only seconds before.

"D o y o u s e e m e n o w , u n c l e ?"

And with that, Seedscatter screamed.

Chapter Two

He had to get out of camp.

Seedscatter couldn't sleep anymore. It was the same dream, every time. And each time, he got closer and closer to being swallowed by the blackness. He couldn't remember the last time he had gotten any uninterrupted sleep.

Dozens of times, he had resorted to going to Shrewtoe for remedies. In a fit of reckless abandon, he had even snuck in to the medicine den and taken three poppy seeds, just to see if an extra dosage would cure what ailed him. All he had received in return was an entire day of grogginess and a cranky attitude that seemed to be set off by anything and everything.

"Owltail, take Beetlefang, Wheatfur, and Nutpaw out to hunt. Your choice of location." He flicked his tail in impatience, waiting for a sign from the party that they had heard him.

The three warriors shared an uncomfortable look. Seedscatter felt annoyance prickle in his fur. "Well?"

"Nutpaw... He's the medicine cat apprentice..." Owltail meowed after a while, realizing that her companions were not willing to speak up.

"Take the other one, then!" Seedscatter snapped, earning a wince from Owltail, who nodded and padded away, steps quick.

Seedscatter bit his tongue, which was dry and rough around the smooth walls of his mouth. He hadn't really meant to snap at the she-cat. His sleep-deprivation was really getting to him. He took a single deep breath in and let it out slowly, though it did nothing for his mood.

Seedscatter padded off, tail lashing in spite of himself. The fresh kill pile was still full from last night' extra parties; everyone was

nervous about the drought. He picked up a skinny field mouse and stalked away to a half-eaten stump where termites had once made a home.

Looking at the tree trunk, savagely destroyed and rotting away, he was reminded bitterly of Silkkit.

She was still nursery-bound, and glossy blue eyes had already peeked through soft, white eyelids. They would take a few weeks to change to their true color, but relief still sat like a stone in Seedscatter's stomach.

As he pondered on this, another tom approached. Seedscatter watched through narrow eyes as Cloudleap padded over, his own white pelt groomed neatly. The tom had a friendly look on his face, but there was a wariness to his smile.

"Hey, Seedscatter!" He meowed, his perkiness faltering just a bit when he took in the brown tabby's expression. "Mind if I join you?"

Seedscatter breathed in deeply. He had to remain calm. He had to play nice. He was simply tired. Cloudleap had done nothing but show kindness to him. Exhale.

"Sure, you can have the rest of this," he meowed, his words careful. In truth, his stomach gave a loud protest, but he set aside the complaint for later.

Cloudleap offered up a grateful look before digging into the small morsel. Seedscatter felt a pang of empathy for the tom; his pelt, though carefully parted to seem healthy and smoothed out to seem glossy, was white, and, therefore, it was easy to see his ribs in their attempt to break through his skin. His gums were dry and his teeth flashed yellow as he chewed, and he winced as he bit down, as if pain wracked his jaws.

Cloudleap was sick.

Call it intuition, but Seedscatter was almost sure of it. He was no medicine cat. He had always been a worrier. But he also knew what illness looked like. However, he couldn't tell what exactly was

wrong: whether Cloudleap hadn't been eating, or if he wasn't getting enough water or sleep. It wasn't *that* apparent to him.

Cloudleap was obviously going to great lengths to disguise it, however obvious it was to Seedscatter. He made a silent promise to himself and the tom wouldn't bring it up just yet, not unless he wasn't going to Shrewtoe for medical attention. He filed the observation away, just in case.

Cloudleap licked lips as he pulled away from the remains of the kill. "Thanks," he said quickly. Seedscatter only nodded in return, not trusting himself to speak.

"But I didn't come over to steal your breakfast," Cloudleap stated sincerely.

"I figured as much," Seedscatter said blankly.

"Goosewing is worried about you. You don't come around to check on her anymore. She misses you. The kits miss you. Even I miss your snarky remarks from time to time." Cloudleap let out a laugh that quickly turned nervous, as if he was worried he had stepped on his companion's tail.

Seedscatter let him speak, not interrupting once, though he had had to hold back a wince when the kits were mentioned.

"Will you visit her just this once?" He didn't need to add it, but Seedscatter had a feeling that he wanted to ease Goosewing's misery at least one more time.

Dread creeping into his stomach, Seedscatter nodded.

The nursery was just an overhanging loft in the barn, filled with soft hay and feathers that had been collected over the moons. Corn husks spilled out of cracks in the wood, effectively sealing out the cold air and keeping the second floor comfortably warm. To prevent injuries, kits were taught from the moment they took their first steps to avoid the ledge, though straw was piled at the base to avoid catastrophe. A set of very old, very unstable stairs led up to the balcony, adding another border between young kits and an

untimely flight from the nest.

As Seedscatter climbed his way up to the nursery, he felt his fear scent spiking. He had already gone to great lengths to disguise it, and was nearly sure that there wasn't any way to distinguish it from the moldy, milky scents of the barn.

The barn itself served many purposes, actually. It provided a den for the leader and the elders, as well as a meeting place for cats to share the news of the day. There were extra stalls for the loners that passed through, conveniently located far from the clan's dens. Had there been room, warriors would sleep inside, too, but there were far too many of them to all fit in such a small space. Instead, they made their nests under the massive, twisting roots of an ancient sassafras tree.

As for prey, mice had long since moved on from their homes in the degrading wood, unfortunately. They still crept among the crevices of the old silo, but that was off limits, except to the medicine cat. The holes in the roof of the tall metal structure provided an excellent view of Silver Pelt, and worked perfectly as a link to StarClan, even if the place would topple to the earth in a strong gust of wind.

A creak in the steps signaled his arrival and the tom was greeted by a loud call of "Seedscatter!" Maplekit, her tiny body maneuvering clumsily through the hay, was the first to reach him. Her white fur, patched with all assortments of reds and blacks, was messy from what Seedscatter could only assume was a game of cornhusk.

Off to the far side of the loft, Windkit batted at the very object of their game, his huge paws easily keeping the husk in the air. But when he heard his uncle's name, the game was forgotten, and he bounded over, if a little easier, to touch noses with the larger cat.

Seedscatter had to apply a lot of will to keep from recoiling. He bent down, breathing hitched, and gently bopped his own nose to his nephew's little pink one. Windkit seemed to remain oblivious enough, though he looked a bit curious at Seedscatter's hesitation.

The big brown tom froze. There were three: Maplekit, Windkit,

and...

"Goosewing, cut it out! I wanna go see Uncle Seedscatter, too!"

A hiss broke through Seedscatter's defences, and all eyes were immediately on him.

"Feather in my paw pad. You, uh, know how sharp the ends of those things can be!" He laughed nervously, shuffling his paws in what he hoped was a convincing way of throwing them off of his trail.

Maplekit was the first to break the silence. "Seedscatter is scared of a *feather*?" She asked, her voice incredulous.

Windkit giggled, and the action was soon picked up by the rest of the litter. Goosewing even had a laughing glint to her copper eyes.

Seedscatter remained silent.

Chapter Three

Seedscatter crept along the dusty floor of the toolshed, his yellow eyes narrowed decisively. His ears flicked left and right as he picked up the scuffling of mice, fat and lazy in their relative safety. The whole place reeked of droppings and corpses, the latter of which made annoyance prick at the tom with unwavering steadfastness.

Today, he wasn't on a hunting patrol. No, he had needed some one-on-*none* time to think. Or, better yet, maybe to just let his thoughts fall away all together. The sharp smells of metal and the musky contrast of old wood gave him the scrap of clarity that he needed to even make such a simple decision.

His newfound levelheadedness was almost corporeal. It whispered to him from his shoulder, hissing to him which floor boards his broad paws should avoid. Navigating two-leg structures was a skill that all apprentices learned, and he had been exceptional at the nonsense patterns long before more pressing, more nonsense issues had dragged him by his ear fur away from the simpler things in life. He shook his head. Seedscatter was here to focus on the present, not the past (nor the future, for that matter).

At the back of the shed, a monster loomed over the scattered twoleg junk, making the rest of the tools seem insignificant in its majesty. Though it wasn't the size of a fully grown monster, it was still huge. Its hide gleamed a dark green through layers of dust and wear. The sides of its pelt were sliced with a cold, shocking yellow. Powerful talons lay sheathed underneath one of three massive black paws. Seedscatter knew the dangers of those claws, how they could whir and slice anything in their path. Along the walls, tools that could have been useful once now rusted from their hooks down. Neither weeds nor herbs had begun their invasion of the space yet. This left the shed feeling cramped and barren.

Despite this, the shed was safe, and soon Seedscatter was drawn away form his careful evaluation. The squeaks of rodents tempted the mind, and he could already taste fresh food on his tongue.

Mouse happened to be one of his favorites. Luckily enough, the place was crawling with them.

Seedscatter crept over to one of the monster's paws, sniffing experimentally at the oddly textured surface. Little hairs crawled across each foot, and the tom inched closer to inspect them. He was drawn back, a hiss catching in his throat and his nose stinging. His ears folded back against his head, the deputy backed away to investigate elsewhere; no mouse in its right mind would nest in *that*.

Mouse holes were more his speed. Waiting, muscles tense, eyes blown wide with anticipation - it all brought him back to his apprentice-hood. He remembered countless training session with his old mentor, Rabbitskip, a bob-tailed she-cat who tended to be a little too unafraid of cuffing him over the ears for messing up an easy leap-and-hold or botching an important catch. She used to pit him and Goosewing against each other right in this very spot in a competition to see who could catch the most prey before sundown. Seedscatter remembered fondly how he and his sister used to try and make each other laugh to trip the other sibling up.

In his reminiscing, Seedscatter failed to notice the small brown face that peered up at him from within the confines of its den. Upon the realization that he wasn't alone, Seedscatter slowly fell down into a hunter's crouch. Deep at the back of his throat, he trilled at the creature gently, calling to it like queens did to kits. Sure enough, the creature crept forwards a pawstep. One back, three forwards, two back, one forwards; it was unsure, but steadily progressing. There wasn't even enough time for it to squeak in alarm when Seedscatter swept his paw out and ended the mouse's life.

He sent a quick thanks up to StarClan then. He felt a purr of satisfaction rumble deep within him at his catch. The clan needed as much food as it could get, and he was glad that he was able to make this contribution.

He was in the shed for the rest of the afternoon, investigating each nook and cranny in the wood and underneath the different twoleg items. He felt a pang of remorse at leaving the place, jaws stuffed with mice, and he looked over his shoulder for longer than necessary as he left. It had been fun to get away for a bit, and the

bustle of clan life would probably shock the serenity from his mortal body.

The camp clearing was quieter than normal when he got back, and Seedscatter quickly gathered that the dusk patrol had recently left. In his clanmates' place, Harestar paced the clearing. It seemed that she hadn't noticed him enter.

He felt his pride die in that very moment.

Soon enough, the dappled she-cat looked up from her frantic muttering, and her eyes locked onto Seedscatter, who was already making a hasty retreat to his nest.

"Where were you?" She hissed, making her way over to her deputy with long, swift strides. Seedscatter imagined that he looked quite like a sparrow might in the talons of a hawk. Behind him, Thistleflower snickered from the prey pile and his suspicions were confirmed.

Seedscatter didn't answer for a long while. He took his time placing the fat mice at his paws, and then meowed quietly, "The toolshed."

Harestar visibly stiffened. "That place is off limits!" She cried out, and several cats looked up from what they were doing in her outburst.

Quieter, this time, she added, "You of all cats know that much!"

It was true, Seedscatter had been the one to tell the clan to stay away from his favorite spot. The shed *had* been unstable, and the sheer amount of cats visiting and taking prey had made the population scarce. But it had been a moon or two since he had made the proclamation, and cats were already suffering as it was.

He was about to state his side of the story when Harestar's steely gaze stopped him in his tracks. She was a beautiful she-cat, tall and lean with thick, short fur that fanned out around her cheeks like petals around a flower. Her eyes were narrowed now, though Seedscatter could still make out the warm amber tones and, at her close vicinity, short white lashes lacing across them like the strands

of a spiderweb.

"My den. Now." The icy calm in her tone had shivers creeping up his spine.

The walk to the barn was torture. Harestar seemed to be the only cat who wouldn't look at him. His clanmates, however, saw no problem in downright staring. Stoneclaw gave him an apologetic look as he passed, but Seedscatter could not hold his friend's gaze. Embarrassment flushed in his ears, making them uncomfortably warm. His dappled companion didn't appear to have noticed the attention they had drawn; if she did, she didn't give two rat tails about it.

It was one of the reasons she had become leader, in Seedscatter's opinion. She was never deterred. In their apprenticeship together, he could not remember a single time she had even been embarrassed. Her urge to do the right thing, her skill in leadership and battle - all of these qualities had made her the best candidate for deputy. Some silently argued that it was also the way that she could keep her emotions in check. But Seedscatter had grown up alongside Harestar, and he knew her like he knew himself. She wasn't all that concrete. He just wished that their communication nowadays didn't always have to be on such unfavorable terms.

Harestar seemed to be heading towards her nest on the far side of the room, though she thought better of it and wheeled around. In the hazy lighting of the cattle stall, her eyes glowed like two golden moons.

"What were you thinking? What if something had happened?" Harestar looked him over, almost as if she expected some vital organ to give out as the words were spoken.

Seedscatter looked at his paws, which were absently brushing at a stray bit of straw. He desperately wished that they would carry him away. They refused to move.

"I wasn't thinking," he murmured back. The words felt bland in his mouth.

"No, you weren't." Harestar replied hoarsely. "Learn your lesson for once, Seedscatter. You are neglecting your duties to skip off to some adventure in forbidden territory. Now please get out of my den."

Seedscatter looked up sharply, a protest already boiling in his chest. She was treating him like a disobedient kit that had strayed too far from the nursery. The words died on his tongue, replaced by shame. He didn't feel guilty any more, not like he had outside. He was just upset that so little trust had been placed in him. He turned to leave, whiskers twitching with indignation.

"The clan is in shambles!" He cried out suddenly, stopping in his tracks. "Our cats are hardly getting enough to eat, let alone drink. The shed is practically begging to be hunted in, and mice thrive among the twoleg scraps. Cats are going to start dropping like flies if we- no, if *you* don't take action! There are kits to think about, and apprentices and warriors too. For StarClan's sake, Cloudleap is al-"

Uh oh.

"'Cloudleap is al-' what, might I ask?"

Harestar's expression prompted a responce, and Seedscatter knew there was no getting out of this confession. Inhaling deeply, he met her eyes with his own.

"Cloudleap already has one paw in a shallow grave."

Chapter Four

The following days were madness.

Tension hung heavy in the air, thick like blood and laced with the stinging spines of nettles. Cats seemed to turn on each other left and right. Everyone was ready, hackles raised and eyes burning with lust - a lust for food, a lust for survival, for prosperity - from sunup and through the scorching day until the bitter chill of night returned. What they were ready for, Seedscatter couldn't say. As aggression coiled through his friends like a snake, the deputy felt as if he were shrinking in on himself. He had no power over these cats any longer.

Seedscatter knew that, deep down, this was all his fault.

Some small, fading part of him argued incessantly with the needless guilt that overpowered it. This was out of his paws completely! He couldn't change the path of the sun across the sky and chide it into a forgiving nature. How in the world was he to stop this panic from rooting itself into FieldClan all on his own?

And the panic wasn't his fault. That wasn't something that the voice could argue against. But such a repetitive argument would not keep the guilt from dragging him down, nor the fatigue from shadowing his duties. If this was the end he would come to, Seedscatter would not be fighting on his way out.

He settled down in his nest that night with an empty stomach. In the shadow of the barn, the warriors' den was caught in a constant state of cold and darkness. Not even the moon graced the cats with its presence. Did he prefer this to the intense heat of the day? Seedscatter wasn't sure. Nevertheless, he rested his head on his paws and focused on the soft breathing of his clanmates. *They might claw my pelt off in the morning*, he thought to himself darkly. *But at least they're tolerable when they can't open their muzzles.*

———

Seedscatter's sides heaved with the effort it took to cough. Something granulated and tasteless had invaded his mouth, and it didn't seem to want to retreat any time soon. It coated his lungs and forced his throat to constrict in violent gasps for air. But there was no air; it was everywhere. He couldn't open his eyes, but he could tell that he was surrounded by miles upon miles of it. Up, down; left and right - he was being strangled by the earth itself.

Pushing upwards desperately, Seedscatter swan through the filth like a carp caught dry on a shoreline. His limbs thrashed and his heart pounded all on the whims of one tireless thought: *up.* Almost too soon to be logical, he felt the substance fall from his pelt, and he gulped breathlessly at the hot wind that tangling in his ear fur. He clambered his way out of the hole giddily, laughing like he had forgotten his sanity underground. And then he saw it.

Sand. Sand as far as he could see. Sand that stretched forever and ever, climbing mountains and diving down into rivets in an endless field of heat and abrasion.

Seedscatter spun around, hoping against hope that he had just been unlucky enough to climb out on the wrong side.

There. On the horizon, a speck of black flourished amongst the gold. If that truly was a copse of trees, or even an animal skeleton he could sleep in for the night, he would be safe. With a grimace up at the sun, Seedscatter wondered if this place even had a night.

His paws, though broad and powerful, were not made for walking on sand. With each step, his feet seemed to sink even further, and he was forced to kick and struggle just to keep his advantage.

With the noonday sun bearing down upon the land, each of his paws were burning with pain, and his steady pace had soon turned into a choppy sprint-to-walk movement broken up by his own exhaustion.

Something about this place was... foggy. Everything that could be excused and obscured by ripples of heat was. No matter how long he traveled, time didn't seem to pass and distance trudged along like a defiant kit, backtracking and then racing ahead only to stop

altogether. The dot on the horizon was only farther away the next time he looked up. Seedscatter didn't understand why he was here. Where had FieldClan gone? Wasn't he just in his nest back home?

The realization hit him with the full force of a monster. This was just a nightmare. And he could do anything in dreams, right? Wasn't that what his mother had always told him to help him sleep through the night? Shutting his eyes, Seedscatter imagined his paws leaving the ground. He pictured his body, free now of mortal weight, sailing swiftly towards the dot like a hawk in a dive.

He peered through one eye only to see that nothing had happened. Seedscatter let out a curse.

"How adorable."

Seedscatter spun around, eyes blazing with all and more of the fury that smoldered down from above. But all he saw was the same scene: sand everywhere.

"Awww, I could just bundle you up and have you for a late night snack! In fact, maybe I will."

Seedscatter wheeled around again. Nothing. He let his eyes trail the horizon slowly, following the rise and fall of the dunes. But each time he went over a spot for a second time, the landscape changed, altered in some way that completely screwed up his careful analysis.

"Face me, coward!" Seedscatter yowled, hating his helplessness in the situation.

"Good idea," hissed the breathy voice, sending trails of sand pouring into his ear. Seedscatter coughed, shuddering uncontrollably at the unfamiliar and very unwanted sensation. His whole body shook in a futile effort to escape the burning discomfort.

Turning and moving to flee in the other direction was his next mistake, and this time, another scorching wind, this one much more powerful than the first, forced him back and onto his side. Seedscatter cried out, but his yelp was drowned in the laughter of

another.

Down below, black sand, darker than night itself, wound around his ankles and through his toes, grains darting as one.

The sand stuck there, constantly moving but never jumping far from the manacles around his paws. They seemed to have a purpose, and as Seedscatter looked up, he saw why.

In front of him stood a cat. Its fur was an unfortunate shade of bone-white that hung dry and thin down its sides. Ribs stuck through its pelt at odd, unnerving angles. The black sand wound around the other cat's ankles too, but it was not the same hostile, swift-acting sand that belted the deputy to the ground. Almost comically so, it slithered through the white cat's legs like an admiring kit. But it was its face that set Seedscatter off the most. Eyes too big for its head glinted back at him, glossy and black. And then its smile... It wasn't natural the way that it sent him a toothy grin. It's mouth stretched from ear to ear, split as if by the talons of an eagle. Pearly white teeth stuck out in a disarray, as if they couldn't agree on who was supposed to be doing what and where.

"How is this, uncle?" Seedscatter felt the sand rattle in his ears, creating an unholy cacophony of sound. Its voice sounded like claws on stone, but it wasn't loud enough to fully understand; the words were almost an afterthought, processed slowly and then placed in the blank spots left for them.

The creature (as it wasn't truly considered a cat in Seedscatter's mind) titled its head, gazing at him with an almost sad expression. And then sand started pouring from its mouth.

Streams of sand flowed swiftly through its parted jaws and spilled to the dessert below, tainting the deep orange tones with tar and ash. As if the commotion had torn more seams in the puppet's body, the river grew wider and soon spread until mud dripped from its eyes and gravel fell from its ears. The creature was deflating, sand burying its husk of a body. Seedscatter moved to scramble back from the skin, but he was still chained down tightly. As it looked up from its own grave with burdened eyes, Seedscatter felt the voice in his ear again.

"H o w i s t h i s , *u n c l e ?"*

And then it was coming from him. Sand drained from every cut and scrape, every hole in his face, every pore on his skin. He was the husk, he was the empty shell of a cat, and he could do nothing to stop it.

This time, however, it wasn't Seedscatter that screamed.

-

Author's note:

Reading this back for the millionth time, I can definitely tell that I was influenced by the Nightmare Before Christmas. Quite the seasonal update! I'm unimpressed by how the short the beginning is, but I didn't leave a lot of room for myself to add much back in. Oh well. I expanded more on that part and the dream, and that was what I had wanted to accomplish. I'm expecting at least one more edited chapter before the new year to get done, and maybe on the first as well. I don't have any plans on that day, So I may spend the hours up until midnight churning out some new material perhaps?

Chapter Five

Seedscatter started awake, eyes wide and fur bristling. His heart pounded in his chest, sending thrills of adrenaline pumping throughout his body. He was in his nest, that much soon became clear to him. But why was he so unsettled? In an instant, he remembered his dream.

And then there it was again: a fierce, high-pitched yowl. He pelted outside, ignoring the grunts of his clan-mates and leaping deftly over bodies like a hare in flight. As he arrived in the camp clearing, Seedscatter felt his panic fall away to annoyance.

There, right outside the barn, stood five kits, completely oblivious to the looks they were getting and focused solely on... whatever it was they were trying to do. Dustkit and Silkkit sat off to one side, the former watching with an amused smirk and the latter rolling her eyes at an alarming frequency. Brackenkit stood in the thick of it, eyes alight in the center of attention. Petalpatch's kits were older than Goosewing's, almost apprentice-aged, and were already acting as if they were next in line for leadership

"You're doing it wrong!" Maplekit whined, shrieking again as Windkit bowled her over.

Tone chiding, she repeated herself. "You have to keep your body level. That's what Blackpaw said."

"Oh, *Blackpaw?* I forgot that you were obsessed with him!" Windkit stretched out the older tom's name, laughing. This time, it was him who was knocked on his back.

Just a few sunrises back, his nieces and nephew had been allowed out of the nursery loft. They had luved up to the expectation of every cat in the clan and were managing to get underfoot during every task imaginable. Even eating was hard with them around.

From his perch on the Sycamore tree roots, Seedscatter watched the

kits play. Seeing them tussle in the grasses, fighting and laughing in equal amounts, he felt a tingle of... Something. Apprehension? Dismay? Or was it... Envy?

He was snapped out of his thoughts, however, when a squeal rang in his ears. He had no time to duck out of the way before Maplekit had pounced, landing squarely on his back and digging tiny claws into his shoulders. Knowing the consequences that he would face from bucking her off, the deputy was forced to lower himself slowly to the ground and suffer the weight on his back.

"Uncle Seedscatter!" She cried joyfully, resting her chin on his shoulder blade.

Windkit leapt up in an attempt to push his sister off, dark eyes flashing gleefully. He only succeeded in alerting her to his presence, and she batted at his advances with an absent-minded paw.

"Will you teach us some battle moves?" Maplekit pleaded in Seedscatter's ears.

Seedscatter only shook his pelt in response, and Maplekit reluctantly climbed off, her eyes watery with fake desperation. The other three kits had made their way over by now, and, at the mention of some early training, the two twin brothers perked up, though they had been taught a bit more respect for their deputy than Goosewing's kits had.

Seedscatter gave in with a quick "Fine," much to the delight of his gathered admirers. They bounced around him as he led them to a more secluded part of camp - one where they wouldn't be a bother to their clan-mates. Under the shade of a gangly sapling, Seedscatter began the lesson.

"When fighting-"

He was cut off by an excited squeak from Maplekit. She gave an apology, looking down at her paws in a display of what Seedscatter could only guess was supposed to be humility. Windkit cuffed her over the ears playfully.

"When fighting an opponent of your own size-"

"What if the opponent *isn't* your own size?" Windkit cut in abruptly, leaning forward as he posed his question. Seedscatter ignored him.

"*When fighting an opponent of your own size,*" he said quickly, pausing for any further interruptions. When none came, he continued. "You can't use that factor against them. You'll have to find weaknesses in other aspects of their fighting style. Look for openings to sensitive areas, anything that can threaten the other cat's balance - it doesn't matter.

"Maplekit, you'll go against Windkit, and play fair!" He sent the two a stern look. "Brakenkit, Dustkit, you two are on the same skill level, and almost apprentices at that. Silkkit... You'll fight winner. Alright?" He gave the white she-kit an apologetic look (or as apologetic as he could muster) and stepped back. He knew nothing would come out of this play fight. Telling them a simple battle tactic would make the game they had been playing moments before seem more fun.

The kits chorused their approval, oblivious to this, and Silkkit moved to sit beside Seedscatter. Already, he could feel his heart rate increasing. Sand winding through his toes; his body deflating; foam flying from his mouth-

"I think it's stupid to learn fighting at such an early age," Silkkit admitted suddenly, and Seedscatter was startled by how *old* she sounded. He didn't think he had ever heard a kit dismiss games like these.

"And what might make you think that?" Seedscatter asked incredulously, a laugh to his voice.

"Well, we're going to learn anyways. You're just feeding them all these grand ideas of battle. How many times have you even needed the skills you were taught?" Silkkit turned her blue eyes on Seedscatter's yellow ones.

Something about the expression she wore told him that she didn't expect an answer. She already had all the information she needed

from his silence. She turned away, facing the two groups of siblings once more, but Seedscatter didn't dare look away. Was he missing something? Some crucial bit of information that linked the Silkkit he knew from his dreams and the one before him now? Could she really be the devastation of FieldClan? Seedscatter wasn't quite sure anymore. How could she be the creature from his dreams with the split smile and black eyes? For the first time in a long time, he felt himself questioning his situation.

Again, he was lurched away from daydreaming when Windkit's triumphant cries rang throughout the clearing. He turned himself away to face the pairs. Brackenkit and Dustkit had already finished their spar and were chatting quietly, bright smiles on their faces and bodies posed neatly next to each other in a way that told Seedscatter that they hadn't realized the state that their golden pelts were in.

"I win! I win!" Windkit yowled victoriously, his big white paws pinning his sister to the floor.

"Yeah, we get it," Maplekit snarled, her voice strained from the weight on her chest. "Now, off me, you lump of fur!"

Windkit obliged, pulling a face at his sister as he clambered off. Maplekit lashed her tail once before sitting down, not a muscle moving as she regarded her brother. The animosity between the two - the way that Windkit was purring just a little too loud and twitching his whiskers just a little too much to be simply self-satisfied - struck a nerve with Seedscatter. He and their mother had always gotten along so well as kits. The deputy sensed that something more was bothering the two than just a rough sparring session.

"Windkit and Silkkit now." Though Silkkit didn't say anything, he could feel her eyes boring into his cheek as she stood. He refused to meet her gaze this time.

The result, if it hadn't already been clear from the start, was quickly realized. Windkit, the much bigger kit, easily tackled Silkkit to her back, and she gave no fight when he did so. She seemed a bit resigned to her fate, as if she knew that trying would just disappoint

her.

Seedscatter left the mock-battle grounds feeling much more conflicted than he typically was. He had never really engaged in conversation with Silkkit before; in truth, he had never really thought to. Now, having heard her speak about her personal opinions and watching her pitted against her brother, he felt what little confidence he had left waver ever so slightly. On the matter of Maplekit and Windkit's rivalry... Seedscatter could tell Goosewing about that later. He was sure that nothing would come of it, anyways.

Now, as he headed over to where the assembled dawn patrol waited, Seedscatter was forced to shove his thoughts to the back of his mind. He needed to be alert right now, and daydreaming could get him into even more trouble with Harestar than he was already in. That idea alone was enough to push Silkkit and her siblings right out of his head.

Already, Wheatfur and Beetlefang were sniffing the air, as if they hoped StarClan would bless then with a mouse this close to camp. Seedscatter knew they wouldn't be that lucky, though he gave them each a nod of approval as he approached the group. With that, the patrol set off, winding through the grasses like adders - swift and silent. But an eagle was far nearer than those careful snakes ever imagined.

-

author's note:

when you go back to foreshadow something that you've already written. how to set yourself up 101 by cresci.

Chapter Six

[Trigger warning: graphic violence]

The grass hissed underneath the paws of four shapes as they wove into a careful formation, fur prickled and eyes narrowed against the rising sun. Seedscatter himself felt that his pelt was heavier today than it had been yesterday, as if something about the drought was slowly dragging him down into the dry soil beneath his paws. Here and now, there was a different problem to be dealt with, and Seedscatter needed to evict all thoughts of his dreams from his mind.

"The rogues have set up a camp just inside the northwest border. Our scouts brought back this information just two days ago, so we aren't sure how long they've been there." That was Yellowfeather, always one for theatrics. The glint in Owltail's eyes suggested that she had been going on about it for awhile.

Owltail whispered something in her mate's ear, and Yellowfeather nodded. "Yes, Harestar has also made sure to tell me that we are not to attack unless provoked," she meowed, carefully eyeing the deputy and his former apprentice. Beetlefang pretended to be offended, earning a scoff from Seedscatter.

Though they were charged with silence that day, the four cats couldn't help but laugh with each other in that moment. There was a lightness to this patrol, one that couldn't be found back at camp.

But in their clan-mates' defense, they had all had a lot on their minds in the past moon, what with the drought, and the famine, and the inevitability of death to think about.

Seedscatter had been forced into a lot lately, both self-induced and inflicted by his leader. For one, he had put it upon himself to watch over the clan's only kits. That task doubled as getting closer to Silkkit. If it was even possible, he would sway her in favor of FieldClan, and had been teaching her about the dangers of spiders

ever since.

This patrol was one of many that he had stuck himself onto in the desperate hope that something good would come out of at least one. But so far, nothing interesting had been encountered besides the crow that Stoneclaw had caught on their last hunt together.

It was a jarring cuff over the ears that snapped him out of his thoughts, and in an instant the rogues were on them. They had melted out of the shrubbery as if they had been born of pure shadow. It seemed as if dozens of cats had materialized, all hissing and spitting and pouncing on his outnumbered companions. Their scents had been disguised effortlessly, as if they had been rolling around in the dust for moons. Seedscatter had no time to think. No luxuries were offered up by the enemy that day.

The cat that had hit him didn't even spare a triumphant smile, though he was obviously proud of himself. One of his friends crowed a quick congratulations and was instantly bowled over by Beetlefang. True to his name, the lithe black cat was a storm of fury as he fought his opponent.

Head still ringing with static from the blow, Seedscatter leaped at the cat, outstretched claws reaching for scruffy, red fur. He was given just enough time to claw the rogue over the nose before he had to rear back, matching curse for curse. His eyes were cold as he watched the ragged creature before him.

The red tom glared back at Seedscatter with malice in his eyes. Scarlet blood dripped from a deep slice on his nose, and his ears sat flat against his skull. A snarl leaped unbidden from Seedscatter's muzzle.

It was only a matter of seconds before the rogue surged into the air, paws outstretched and ready to assault the cat below him. But Seedscatter dashed nimbly under his opponent, unbalancing the tom and flying back to shove him into the dust. Every courtesy was unlearned in a heartbeat, a heartbeat that bled wild instinct through every tuft of fur in his body.

But with his shoulder buried in the red cat's stomach, Seedscatter

had left himself open. He yelped when teeth met his ear, biting down hard at the sensitive skin. He clawed frantically at his opponent's belly, but a warning growl sounded in the rogue's chest. He could do much more damage in his position than Seedscatter could hope to manage.

He was held in that spot, fear scent on his ragged breaths, for only a short, excruciating time before he was shoved away, half scrambling and half tumbling a good distance before spinning around. But the red tom's focus had left him, and he was deemed unimportant in only a pawful of seconds. He followed the rogue's gaze and felt an exultant crow bubble in his throat.

Yellowfeather had pinned a dark grey tom to the ground. Both cats were panting, and the tom was spitting hateful words in the clan cat's face. She took it all with dignity, staring down sweetly to balance out the claws that she dug into his chest.

It was then that another cat strode into the clearing, and Seedscatter let out a sharp breath. "Let him go, and we might just let you live," meowed a coy, calico she-cat. Her eyes gleamed like two yellow fires, even in the harsh light of day. Yellowfeather's hold only tightened.

This seemed to strike a nerve in the calico. This time, the lilt to her voice was gone. "Let him go."

"Oh yeah?" Yellowfang responded shortly. Her captive sucked in a deep breath, and blots of bright red sprang to his wounds, darkening the grey fur on his chest.

Seedscatter felt a stab of fear as the calico paced forward. Memories from his kit-hood flooded his mind. Two she-cats; furious shouting; insults shot from one side of camp to the next; tails lashing as one stayed and the other disappeared into the grasses.

"Yeah." Her whisper was dangerous, so much harsher than the shouts that struck the deputy from all directions. And though Yellowfeather would have been too young to even remember her leader's apprenticeship, he couldn't mistake the stab of fear in the golden tabby.

The calico must have noticed it too, because confidence flooded her posture. Yellowfeather loosened her claws, sheathing them with a look of dread. Blood had started to flow freely from a wound next to her eye, and her breaths were ragged and inconsistent. She set her shoulders back, looking down on the she-cat with defiance clearly written across her features. No matter what the circumstance was, she was not going to hang her head to this enemy.

That's when she leaped at the calico's throat.

Audible gasps murmured through the crowd and shocked yowls sprinkled the clearing. There may not have been many manners in this group of rogues, but they seemed to have rules. They respected status, at least. Not a hair on cat's pelt moved as Yellowfeather was easily pitched onto her back, and not a single whisker twitched as a blood-stained paw was pushed forcefully onto her chest.

"This is your chance to leave," the grey tom rasped out, finally able to bring himself into a standing position and shaking out his pelt.

"Never," Owltail hissed from the choke-hold she was caught in, ignoring the gaping wound on her shoulder. Beetlefang nodded his assent, too busy restraining his own opponent to do or say much.

"Shame." With a flash of white, the calico sank her teeth into Yellowfeather's throat, ignoring the yowl that came from Seedscatter, and the cry that knocked Owltail free from her assailant. She smiled into the killing bite as Beetlefang barked out a strangled threat.

When she looked up, her eyes were alight with a wild blaze, a forest fire intent on taking and feeding on everything in its path. It was manifested in one sharp cackle that she choked out through the blood that gurgled from her muzzle.

"Get out."

And they did. What could they have done in the face of a creature like that? Though they had dealt with rogues before, they had never truly encountered someone like her.

For no FieldClan cat had ever been forced to defeat one of their own.

Chapter Seven

Seedscatter ran. He ran until his muscles burned. He ran until his sides heaved up the scarce contents of his stomach. He ran until his paws bled. He ran until the horror of that day caught up to him and dragged him down.

Beside him, the remaining members of the patrol were feeling the effects, as well. Though Beetlefang was in better condition than the others, Owltail was bleeding profusely from the wound on her shoulder, her small frame wracked with sobs. Emotion clung fiercely to her dark-furred body, contrasting the lack of feeling in her teary eyes, staring blindly at a point in the distance that only she could see. It wasn't official, but most could tell that the two had been close - Yellowfeather and Owltail, that is. She was taking it hard.

Seedscatter staggered on his paws, blinking through a veil of crimson that dribbled relentlessly from his right ear. There would be scarring, he was certain of it. Owltail would also feel the effects of the battle, as would Beetlefang. The small patrol would most likely never shake the sight of Yellowfeather's brutal murder. Seedscatter knew he wouldn't.

A fresh wail of grief slipped off of his tongue like the roll of storm clouds. It died in the air, stagnant to all but his companions.

"We need to keep going," Beetlefang croaked, stumbling his way over to Seedscatter, tone numbed.

"Owltail can't make it," he replied, wincing at the rawness in his own voice.

"She *won't* make it if we stay," Beetlefang insisted, then, "What if I run ahead?" Though he didn't say it aloud, both toms knew that he was the most put-together of their party.

Seedscatter simply nodded, crashing onto his stomach and letting

the ache wash over him in a sick form of comfort. He deserved to hurt. He deserved to feel the pain that Yellowfeather had endured. *Why couldn't it have been him?*

Owltail trembled, curling up into a tight knot of limbs. Her scratch had begun to clot, at least. But it would need attention. There were no cobwebs around, as far as Seedscatter knew. If Beetlefang didn't hurry...

"Se-Seed..." Owltail coughed. "Why did she h-have to... To..."

Seedscatter shushed her, running a tail over her side. He was never the best at comfort, and he didn't think it was something one could practice. So he did his best, and it wasn't enough.

But that cat... That *monstrous* cat that had killed Yellowfeather... She was no stranger to Seedscatter.

Only two winters back, the calico had left with a band of loners in the night, steeling away without a second glance, not even stopping to say goodbye. She had seemed in a hurry to leave the clan behind, so why was she back? If she was here to fight, then she was in luck. FieldClan was small in numbers, and there had been at least a dozen or more cats to meet them, all of which were able-bodied.

Exhaustion tugged at Seedscatter's eyelids as her curled up beside Owltail. Blood and fear mingled in the air as one, sour and metallic and bitter and floodeding his senses. For once, his subconscious was quiet. For once, he was allowed to sleep in peace.

———

Seedscatter awoke in flashes. He watched his body, limp and matted, being dragged through the grass. He listened as faded yowls of shock and grief filled the air. He tasted sharp smells on his tongue, of herbs, of blood, of pain. He lived in a state of darkness and light, flashing in and out of dreary consciousness and suffocating sleep. His senses constantly felt as if they had been flushed with river water, and all directional cues had fled from his mind. Up, down, left, right, forwards, backwards; none of it mattered.

But then he smelled smoke.

And he opened his eyes.

Flames dances across his vision, and he jumped back, startled. Tongues of orange and gold licked at the air, surrounding him in a tight circle. The air stank of charred fur, and he twitched singed whiskers fearfully, eyes wide with a dying hope.

The fire crept closer still, creating an enticing dance in the air. Black plumes of smoke billowed upwards, fogging his vision on the way.

A cough sputtered from his mouth, quickly turning into a hack and then a wheeze. He couldn't breath. Fresh air was only a distant memory in this burning forest, and his chest heaved with the effort it took to inhale and exhale what little oxygen remained.

As he began to back up, a voice took hold with sharp-edged claws.

"Poor dear, I hope you aren't afraid of a little heat."

And suddenly, Seedscatter wasn't there anymore. Heat still radiated off of everything, but it didn't affect him. He just... Didn't care.

His paws found their way along a dark forest path, steps decisive in this strange land. It was an odd feeling, to let instinct take over. He didn't even know he *had* this instinct.

"Wait up!" He became aware that he wasn't alone. Running alongside him, if a little behind, another shape matched him stride for stride.

She was the spitting image of Silkkit, with tousled white fur and large blue eyes. But there was something missing. The ageless shadow that fell upon her expression was gone, replaced with a youthful sparkle that brightened as she laughed.

"No need to show off, brother," she meowed coyly, breathless in her chase.

"I wasn't showing off. I was simply... Testing you!" But that wasn't

Seedscatter. The voice that sped from his lips was much different. A sharp accent rolled from his tongue, and this wasn't his sister...

"I'm sure!" The she-cat teased, panting.

Both cats slowed, and the image became foggy. Static, almost like a blizzard of his earlier dream, rolled over the image, bringing it into and out of focus.

"Stop..."

"STOP."

"I said, S T O P !"

Searing pain wrapped around every part of Seedscatter's being, every particle of matter. Yellow eyes met yellow eyes as both cats gave into the fire.

Chapter Eight

Seedscatter was jolted awake suddenly, breathless and panting. For a moment or two, the air still smelled of charred flesh and burning wood, but it passed, leaving him with only a memory. It was still a while before he felt his claws detach themselves from dry moss.

He took a minute to recuperate, grasping a firm hold on reality and scrambling to figure out where he was and what was going on. With a shaky breath, Seedscatter forced his muscles to relax. He was in the medicine den, just beneath the old silo and not too far from the barn. Metal sheets slept above him, draped with morning glories and eaten by rust. Grasses spilled out of old farm tools; white stones swam like minnows through barley and horsetail; the fat withered heads of poppies jeered from the splinters of a wooden barrel.

In his panic, Seedscatter had failed to digest the more pressing details, and jumped when a body stirred next to his. He looked down to take in the ragged form of Owltail, sleeping as fitfully as one would expect. She would need a lot more than medicine to get her through recovery. He brushed his tail over her flank, sweeping around the gash on her shoulder.

His own injury, a large tear in his ear, was stinging profusely. The way it ached made Seedscatter wonder if the pain would ever go away.

He rested his head on his paws with a sigh. His own morals, and those of the clan, of course, told him never to kill another cat. If the calico had given those up, then was she even considered a cat? Weren't all kits taught from birth that murder was wrong and unjust? If she had been a clan cat, then these beliefs should have been further strengthened. And even so, loners didn't kill for power. If they took it upon themselves to play judge, jury, and executioner, it would be in self defense.

It just didn't sit right.

"Eat these."

Seedscatter looked up, meeting the stern but concerned gaze of Shrewtoe. She nudged a leaf wrap towards him with one paw. The smell alone was enough to dissuade Seedscatter from ever getting injured again. Nonetheless, he gulped down the parcel, grimacing. The flavor sat in his mouth smugly, and he resisted the urge to retch.

The older cat snickered. "Serves you right," she meowed hoarsely. "For scaring the clan." She sat down with a *huff*.

"I suppose you'd like to tell me your story? I've already heard Beetlefang's thrilling account. He's not much for melodramatics, I'm afraid." She barked out a laugh - strange, really, how she could pull off such a sound - and pulled her tail over her paws. "Will you know something he missed?"

Seedscatter shivered. Did he? Were his prophetic dreams tied somehow to his waking nightmares? The taste in his mouth worsened.

So he told Shrewtoe. He told her of Harestar's orders, of the patrol, and of the ambush. He told her of his opponent, of losing his ear in battle and of the calico. He grew quiet as he accounted Yellowfeather's death, of her cold, sightless stare. And then they ran. They were cowards and then ran. They took the easy way out,

"And we ran." Seedscatter pressed his ears back against his head, expression blank as the pictures flashed before his eyes. "We didn't even check to see if she was still alive. She could have been alive! We have to go back - we can bring a bigger party and-"

Shrewtoe shushed him with a small hiss. "Shut up," she meowed. "You're making a fool of yourself, Seedscatter. There is nothing you could have - no, look at me - there is nothing you could have done."

Seedscatter looked up. Silhouetted by the faint light coming from outside and struck by beams of light that filtered in through the roof, Shrewtoe had changed. She was not old and frail in that moment. She was powerful. Why he was pierced by fear in that

moment, Seedscatter did not know.

The illusion disappeared when the old medicine cat choked out a loud cough, nearly doubling over in the effort it took to expel whatever it was from her chest. Seedscatter moved to stand but she waved him away with a flick of her tail.

It was Nutpaw who finally came in to help her, though he had to duck a mean-looking swipe to his ears in order to do so. He laid her down in her nest and rushed off to find the herbs he needed, muttering to himself all the while.

The apprentice's frenzy took him all over the space, skipping across beds and nearly tripping over a dark shape in the corner. Squinting, he realized it was Beetlefang, hunched in on himself and smaller than Seedscatter had ever seen him. Only the slightest movement of his figure hinted that he was still alive.

Noticing Seedscatter's expression, Nutpaw stated softly, "Beetlefang said it had taken him all morning to reach camp. His paws were bloodied by the time he reached camp and worse when he got to us." He didn't even turn to look at the brown tabby as he pitied the other tom. "We found you in a clearing nearly on the opposite end of the territory, half dead and looking as if you'd been chewed up and spit out. Owltail was the worst of the three of you."

"We?" Seedscatter asked.

It took a moment before Nutpaw understood what Seedscatter was getting at. Through a mouthful of herbs, he answered, "Oh! Yes, I was sent out as a precautionary measure. Y'know, just in case either of you had to be treated on the scene." He broke off to place a bundle of budding stems in front of his mentor, who gave him a withering glare before taking a bite.

"You weren't doing too well. You had this horrible fever. You were panting something awful by the time we got you back here, and it really didn't break until about half a day ago."

Seedscatter sputtered. "Half a day! How long was I out?"

Shrewtoe beat her apprentice to the answer. "About four. Tonight would make five."

"Oh!" Nutpaw interjected again. "You must be hungry! And thirsty, but we've been giving you water. Do you want something from the prey pile? I'll do my best to find what you want, but give me a second option."

"Just a mouse, or whatever you can find," Seedscatter murmured back. Nutpaw was gone by the time he had finished his sentence.

From across the den, Shrewtoe laughed. "He's taken more moons from my life than StarClan itself," she chuckled. "I'll let you rest," she said, standing and heading for the entrance.

"You need it more than anyone," Shrewtoe stated somberly. Then, her voice lighthearted this time, "You'll be dealing with Nutpaw for a moon, if the ancestors aren't on your side."

Watching her slide out between the growth at the entrance, Seedscatter's only thought was that he never got the chance to tell her about Silkkit.

---

brief announcement! it's my birthday in two days (and christmas, I guess lmao), so i wanted to give you guys another chapter as an early present! note that i did write this all in one sitting and only read it over once for mistakes, so please point out anything that doesn't make any sense! as for editing, i haven't made it past chapter three because the intro is so bad. keep me in your prayers as i work up the courage to tackle that project. but here is chapter eight for your reading enjoyment, and keep yourselves safe and warm until chapter nine!

-Cresci

Chapter Nine

The cold was settling across FieldClan's territory as the heat plodded south to claim new lands. Grasses browned and trees turned gold, but still the drought had not abated. Even as the landscape turned to a pallet of amber before the cats' eyes, water and prey were still scarce. And yet hope was finally returning, as if spurred on by the thought of bitter frost and biting winds. Such a thing wasn't commonplace, but it was still so.

As the sun faltered over clan cats' heads, time passed. A moon went by in the blink of an eye as August was rinsed away and chased by September. In this time, Brackenkit and Dustkit grew. Their paws broadened and their kit-soft faces sharpened under the feathered brush of age's tireless paws.

Goosewing's children grew as well. Maplekit's eyes narrowed at the dry, solitary world she had been born into, where cats fought silently over prey and brother could turn on sister over something so simple. Windkit's mind was scraped and filed and honed until all he knew was what he was supposed to be. But Silkkit was simply their sister.

Seedscatter healed quicker than what was anticipated by Shrewtoe, and he left the medicine den with a new scar in his ear. Owltail was not given that kind of miracle. To the deputy, she was far too still in her nest for Seedscatter and Beetlefang to walk away healed. And still, he was worn down until his face hit the earth. Night after night, he was hit by storm and sand, storm and sand until he was so warped by mud that that was what he was.

But tonight, Harestar stood under the retreating light of a crescent sky in front of FieldClan. Her eyes saw each cat, broken, beaten, but still alive. And she smiled, because all she saw was a mirrored image in a pool of water.

The dappled she-cat perched in the sycamore, paws balanced easily in the crook of two branches. The two halves of the tree recoiled

from her, spreading and faltering until their life was spread too thin and the growth ended in a magnificent display of violets and reds. Seedscatter sat beneath her, eyes alight in the silver air. His breath was a faint gathering of condensation around his muzzle in the leaf-bare night.

"FieldClan." Her voice was a song to Seedscatter's ears, regal and powerful. "Tonight we gather to acknowledge and reward the growth of two of our kits. Brackenkit and Dustkit have both chosen to follow paths of warriors after their mother and father, and we welcome them as apprentices for the first time tonight."

Yowls of approval followed her short speech, and the two toms glowed in the praise.

"Brackenkit," Harestar called, ending the short celebration with an indiscernable twitch of her whiskers. The tom stepped forward at her command. "Under this moon, do you promise to remember the warriors before you who stood in the same light?"

Brackenkit nodded his affirmation, voicing it with a strong "I do."

"Under these stars, do you promise to follow the path that our ancestors have chosen for you and do your best to uphold their code?"

Another yes.

"Seedscatter will make sure that you keep to your promises, sacred tonight and forevermore. You will receive your name when the clan sees your progress as an apprentice of FieldClan and deems you ready to take your full title," Harestar meowed, eyes warm with affection as she spoke the words that would bring the young tom into his next faze of life. "Brackenpaw, you may join your mentor."

The golden cat leaped eagerly up to join Seedscatter on his perch. Seedscatter draped his tail across his apprentice's back in a brief gesture of approval before letting it curl lazily over his paws.

The ceremony was repeated when Dustkit stepped up, far more nervous than his brother had been under the stares of his clan-

mates. He was paired with Cloudleap, who almost jumped for joy at his new appointment to the status of mentor.

For the first time in a long time, Seedscatter wasn't thinking about the dreams or the White Cat, as he had named his nightmare's leading actor. His paws were on solid ground, and he was standing tall. For the first time since Beetlefang (Beetlepaw, at the time, of course), Seedscatter had a responsibility that wasn't linked to the death of FieldClan.

And that was when, yowling up to the heavens, Seedscatter felt a prickle in his pelt; it was a distinct sensation that he hadn't had in such a long, long time. He closed his eyes, parting his jaws as he tilted his face up to the sky. Soft pricks, far to light for his liking dashed his eyelids and tapped at his whiskers.

He was beaten to the announcement by Brackenpaw, who called out the word that no cat had dared to even dream about in moons.

"Rain!"

For a heartbeat, no response came from the cats below. Not one of them was willing to believe so early and be let down so soon. But as the clouds above darkened the sky even further, the downpour increased in its urgency.

Wheatfur, who had remained shy and silent for as long as Seedscatter could remember, was the first to raise her voice back into the choir that followed the apprenticeship ceremonies. One by one and two by two, she was joined until the chorus rang out through the fields.

Seedscatter was too relieved to care that he was soaked to the bone and shaking uncontrollably. Pure euphoria was pouring from the sky in rivulets.

He was struck by the sudden thought that Goosewing's litter had never seen rain. He turned his gaze onto them quickly, flicking his ears over to their position just outside the barn doors. Windkit and Maplekit had paused their bickering and were watching their clanmates with wide eyes, unsure where they fit in to this

celebration. Silkkit was even further from their places, firmly planted by her mother's side. Was that nostalgia he glimpsed in her expression, or just an illusion cast by the shadows?

But Seedscatter couldn't care less about whatever he saw. There was a new fire burning within his clan-mates, and he wanted to soak up whatever he could of it before it was gone. This blaze was warm, unlike the heat that had permeated him before.

It was a long time before the cats retreated to their dens that night, each one dripping and sputtering as if they had been dunked in a river. But there was a new faith flickering like a young star in Seedscatter. He went to sleep that night knowing that dreams would not haunt him.

But it was not a dream that he needed to be worried about.

The morning drew sleepy heads out from underneath the sycamore, gazing out of the den with happy eyes. It was already noon by the time that the realization came that one of these heads was missing.

Cloudleap's body was dragged out of his nest for the world to see, his still-damp fur clinging to his bones and his eyes far too dim in his shrink-wrapped skull.

-

author's note:

i'm sorry

Chapter Ten

The fur on Cloudleap's scruff was damp and cold in Seedscatter's mouth as he dragged the younger tom from the den. Whatever warmth had once existed within the now-lifeless body was gone. With a shiver, Seedscatter came to the grim conclusion that his sister's mate had been dead for a long time.

Seedscatter found himself struggling with Cloudleap's body as he backed out of the den. The dead weight pulled him down, especially after such a hard summer. *I shouldn't complain; FieldClan's cats are all weak*, he chided himself. *Some more than others...*

What had gone wrong? Cloudleap had looked to be in good health, and he had seemed at ease as of late. Seedscatter couldn't imagine how the last night's rain could have so easily sapped the strength from his clanmate's body.

His head hung low, Seedscatter dropped Cloudleap in the center of camp, shrinking away to let the crowd surge forward. His clanmates were quick to fall onto the white cat. Those closest to him wailed, while others murmured from the outskirts of the ring, circling to get a better look. Shrewtoe sat across from Seedscatter. He met her unreadable gaze for only a moment before guilt tore his eyes away.

Seedscatter didn't know how to react. Death had followed him around like bees flock to a hive; they would swarm in to add new weight to his conscience and leave before he could do anything to stop them. He didn't think there was anything that could surprise him anymore. All he felt now was the sting of guilt.

To his left, Petalpatch buried her nose in her son's fur. Brackenpaw was stuck to her like a burr, despite being made an apprentice already. Seedscatter wondered if the brothers had even moved out of the nursery yet.

Thistleflower sat close to Stoneclaw, their pelts brushing in a mutual attempt at comfort. The young couple whispered quietly,

clearly subdued.

Blackpaw sat with his brother, running his tail up and down his brother's back, who remained unresponsive as he stared at his paws.

Seedscatter hadn't seen a vigil since he was a 'paw, having been confined to the medicine den when he assumed Yellowfeather and Owltail had recieved theirs. He didn't realize how effected the clan would be; Cloudleap had been left in FieldClan as a kit by his mother, and didn't have any familial ties except to Goosewing, Maplekit, Silkkit, and Windkit.

He should have said something when he had first found out. Seedscatter had known, and yet he had kept his muzzle shut. How many others had acted similarly? Did Shrewtoe herself have a clue as to what was going on? Did Nutpaw? Goosewing? Grief weighed heavily on his shoulders, but it wasn't for Cloudleap's death. It was for his own mistakes and how they had impacted the clan; he couldn't bring himself to mourn deeply for the loss of his clanmate.

"StarClan has forsaken us!" came Goosewing's cry from the center of the circle. Seedscatter found her immediately, and a sharp wave of panic coursed through him. He hadn't even thought about how Goosewing would react.

Seedscatter parted his jaw, ready to speak up and intervene, when another voice piped up. "It was his time." Shrewtoe stood, a statue in the sea of quivering FieldClan cats. "You cannot blame the ancestors for what has befallen Cloudleap."

Venom laced Goosewing's expression, and the crowd parted to let the two she-cats speak face to face. Whether they feared Shrewtoe's composure or Goosewing's rage, Seedscatter couldn't tell.

"How dare you?" Goosewing hissed, her fur spiking to match the fury with which she lashed her tail. "You dare to place the blame on his shoulders? Where were you, when Cloudleap was alone and... and dying? You claim to be a medicine cat, and yet you, Shrewtoe, fail to live up to more than your name: *shrew*." There was silence following the queen's accusation. Shrewtoe's demeanor did not change.

Seedscatter desperately wanted to whisk his sister away before she could make this worse. He wanted to push her back and to reprimand Shrewtoe for her insensitivity. But he was frozen in time as he watched the hateful words fly off of his sister's tongue.

Shrewtoe let her gaze drip from Goosewing's head to her toes, and then back up to meet the queen's copper eyes. "You're in shock. See me in the medicine den when you've come to your senses. Nutpaw, Coldpatch, and Kestrelfeather will begin the burial process, and I will be in the barn, speaking like an adult." The medicine cat turned, letting her paws fall lazily as she headed to the barn. There, she would consult with Harestar about the matter that had come up. Usually, the mate of the deceased would also attend. Watching his sister, Seedscatter doubted that she would make an appearance.

Seedscatter finally stumbled over his paws in a swift trot just as Goosewing made to go after Shrewtoe. He stood in front of her, ears pressed back against his head and a biting comment posed to spring into the air. But the hurt in his sister's eyes stopped him in his tracks.

"Come here," he murmured, drawing his tail around Goosewing. With some reluctance, the tabby she-cat allowed her brother to draw her across the clearing. For the second time that day, Seedscatter experienced the uncomfortable sensation of dragging dead weight along behind him.

Seedscatter didn't sit. As much as he would have liked to, he wouldn't be able to allow himself such a luxury. Goosewing was a mother first, and even her own mental health would have to come second today. They had a few short minutes to talk.

Squaring his shoulders, Seedscatter meowed, "Are you alright?" As much as he would have liked to snap at her for causing such an outburst, she had just lost Cloudleap. Seedscatter was a lot of things, but he wasn't heartless.

"No, I'm not." Goosewing's answer was sharp. Her tone was emotionless, but her eyes were spilling her thoughts onto the earth for Seedscatter to interpret. There was only so much she could hide from her brother. But she turned away from Seedscatter, her tail

lashing.

Goosewing's claws dug into the sand. "I have to go over there and tell my kits why their father is lying in the center of camp, dead."

Seedscatter hung his head, examining the bits of gravel at his feet while his sister spoke. He knew why Cloudleap was dead. The words could have come out so easy if only he could have opened his mouth. But what would he say, even if he could manage to find his voice? *Hey, Goosewing! Guess its a shame that your mate died. I bet you wish there was a way we could have prevented it, right? Well, guess what!*

Instead, he turned his eyes up to the sky, which was overcast with the promise of another shower. A trio of small, swift birds flew overhead, chirping urgently to one another before disappearing from sight.

Suddenly, despite the lack of an answer from Seedscatter, Goosewing started speaking again, and the brown tabby tom forced himself to look down.

"And that... that absolute... *shrew*! Why didn't she warn me? Warn *us*? For StarClan's sake, it's not as if she's a medicine cat for nothing. I would assume that she has a basic knowledge of herbs and other plants." Goosewing paused to scoff, kicking up dirt with a swipe of her foreleg.

Seedscatter watched his sister with pain in his eyes. She wasn't the best at grieving; he had had first hand experience watching her recede in on herself. But before, she had had Cloudleap to lean on along with Seedscatter's support. Now all she had was him, and he doubted that he would be of much use.

Without another comment, Goosewing stalked off. Seedscatter watched her go, following her shape until she reached her kits. She sniffed each one stiffly before meowing something that he couldn't catch from where he stood. Windkit let out a mournful wail that was cut short as Goosewing pulled the kit to her chest in a fierce hug.

Seedscatter let his gaze linger on the family, watching for Silkkit's and Maplekit's reactions. He didn't expect much of the calico she-cat, but he tensed for some violent response from her sister.

Nothing came. Seedscatter wasn't sure whether he was supposed to be surprised or not. He had believed in malice that had never existed because of his own nightmares. He had invented all that he knew about his sister's kit. She was five moons old, and already he was painting a murder story with her as the villain. The only death in her backstory was that of her father, and it was his fault alone. Had he not been so wrapped up in his own struggles, Cloudleap might have gotten the medical attention he needed.

Seedscatter lashed his tail against the ground, watching as the crowd around the white tom grew once again. He would be buried soon; where he would lie, Seedscatter didn't know. Goosewing would probably have to select a plot in the fields behind the barn if she didn't know of Cloudleap's ideal location.

With a final glance at his kin - Petalpatch now stood with the kits as Goosewing watched the elders lead Cloudleap away in silence - Seedscatter made his way out of camp.

As he walked, eyes seemed to cling to his fur like burrs, sending a prickling sensation up and down his spine. He didn't look back. What use was it to feed his superstition? At some point, his irrational fears would leave him alone

Seedscatter's pelt bristled until he was out of sight of camp.

Chapter Eleven

The prey trails that Seedscatter had followed out of camp grew skinnier as he found himself farther and farther away from home. The grasses around him hissed as he brushed past, disturbing the fragile peace and sending prey scuffling out of his way. This far into the territory, the field was rich and teeming with all sorts of small animals. Seedscatter was itching to hunt, but his muscles burned with fatigue.

A flock of birds flew overhead, crying out loudly. Seedscatter allowed himself to stop for a moment as he watched them disappear, panting lightly. He hadn't paced himself earlier into his escapade, deciding that speed had been more important than preservation of energy. Now, he found himself short of breath.

He sat, thumping his tail on the ground and giving his forepaw a lick. As he caught his breath, he allowed his thoughts to linger on the change that the morning had brought about.

His new resolution to pull himself away from his hare-brained fantasies had lifted a weight off of his shoulders that he hadn't even known was there. Even through his exhaustion, he found himself twitching his whiskers in a private show of eagerness; he could promise the day to himself and not worry about prophesies or doomsdays or, most importantly, the White Cat.

Frankly, Seedscatter had a hard time thinking that the White Cat was anymore than a figment of his imagination or a hallucination drawn up by his hunger during the night. Looking back, he could almost laugh at how kit-like it all was. *How did I manage to be deputy when I was off saving the clan like I was just allowed out of the nursery for the first time?*

Seedscatter shook his head, scoffing. Yet, despite his elated mood, he couldn't help but think of Cloudleap's body suffocating under a mountain of soil back at camp. Seedscatter had never been

particularly fond of the young tom. But with so much energy, he had brought a liveliness to his clanmates that the deputy just couldn't replicate. His head bowed, the tabby tom wondered what the price of his new realization had been.

He didn't allow himself much time to rest. As much as he would have liked to, Seedscatter couldn't force himself to grieve for his sister's mate. He had a clan to worry about. Right now, there were mouths to feed back at camp, and he wasn't about to let more cats go hungry while they busied themselves mourning the starved.

With his jaw parted and his ears pricked, Seedscatter stalked forward. If the field was as rich as he had thought it might have been earlier, he could have turned a corner and found fresh prey just waiting for him to catch.

But as minutes passed, his expectations were not met. Seedscatter wasn't interested in mice or voles; he was looking for a meal to take home, not a snack! Who would respect a deputy who disappeared only to bring back a scrap of fur? He let out a quiet hiss, giving his chest fur an embarrassed lick. He was losing his temper far too quickly. If he had gotten enough sleep, he might have proved to be a better solo hunter. Now, he felt as though he needed another warrior to lean over his shoulder and tell him what scent trails to follow.

I'd have better luck if I wasn't on this fox-hearted prey path, he thought to himself. But if he wasn't on the prey path... With a careful glance behind him, as if he expected his old mentor to jump out and scold him for his next actions, Seedscatter pushed his head into the grass. His whiskers twitched indignantly when his face was met by the sharp stems, still dry and brittle from the drought's long-lasting effects. When nothing happened, he forced his shoulders in, and crept forward even further until his back paws left the trail.

Nerves swarmed like wasps in his stomach, and Seedscatter had to force himself not to spin around and run back to camp with his tail between his legs. He steeled his courage once more, bristling his fur against the grass

Instincts told every cat not to wade into the fields without a

clanmate to accompany them. Warriors could easily get lost and never find their way back to camp, forced to wander the land forever in search of a prey trail they could follow back home. That was what his mother had told him and Goosewing moons ago when they were still relying on her milk.

But an instinct stronger than that was driving him on in search of bigger game, and the scent of rabbit was practically curling under his nose. He padded forward.

Instantly, Seedscatter realized that it would be harder to weave his way forward in such an untouched section of territory. He could hardly see where he was going! His ears picked up every sound he made as he trudged forward, wincing. He felt like a badger, and he probably looked like one too. He could just imagine the way that his sister would laugh at him if she was there with him. *And she'd be right to do so; I'm the biggest mouse-brain this side of the Thunderpath!*

The throaty mutter of a crow tore him from his indignant monologue, and Seedscatter fell into a crouch, his jaws wide as he drank in the location of the bird. It was clearly confident, as loud and overzealous as it was. It didn't take the tom long to find it. The crow was hobbling about in a small patch of muddy soil, pecking at the ground eagerly for bugs. He felt ants crawling through his pelt at the thought of the grubs and worms that packed the dirt. His recent struggles didn't necessarily improve his opinion of bugs.

While he was distracted, Seedscatter had failed to notice that a pair of startling yellow eyes had found themselves just across the clearing. He flinched at the sight of them, silently falling back into the grass. An unfamiliar smell hit his tongue, and he winced at the sour taste. *They smell like they've been bathing in crowfood for the last moon!*

He watched indignantly as the rogue crept slowly towards the crow, its whiskers twitching in anticipation. *What right does he have? What a waste of my time.* But, as he watched the rogue, he didn't think that a standoff would be much of a challenge. There was a youthful cockiness to the cat's walk, and something told him that a successful catch would definitely allow Seedscatter to catch the tom off guard. Then, it wouldn't be difficult to take the catch for himself.

The cat leaped forward, and his grey tabby fur seemed to turn white as it was hit by the sun's rays. Clearly, the bird had noticed too, and the tom fell a whisker-length short of the crow. Not a second had passed before the crow had taken off into the air, a startled caw sounding from its beak.

Seedscatter felt a rush of anger flood his senses. How dare this cat come and chase off his catch! Before he could storm into the clearing, a voice rose out of the space behind the intruder.

"I guess you should stick to prey that can't run away. Do you think the clot will stoop to eating rocks?"

A well-muscled tortoiseshell she-cat stepped into the clearing, a sly, teasing glint in her eyes. Her companion didn't seem to share her sense of humor. His tail lashed with pent-up frustration.

"Very funny, Jinx. If only your skillful retorts matched your hunting. Then, maybe we wouldn't both be empty-pawed."

"Mouse-brain!" Jinx lashed at the tom's face. Quick as an adder, the grey tabby withdrew, a hiss swelling in his chest. She had just barely missed his face. "You're lucky you were even let out of camp, what with your record of success."

This time, it was Jinx's turn to duck as a barrage of slashes rained down on her. Seedscatter noted with some interest that the tabby's claws had been sheathed before they both stood back, bristling with a fury that Seedscatter hadn't witnessed in two clanmates. Though, he thought to himself, they weren't really clanmates. *What had Jinx called it? A clot?* Seedscatter hadn't ever heard that word before, though something about it quickened his pulse.

Could the rogues that had killed Yellowfeather and Owltail be associated with these two? They were hardly past the typical age of an apprentice, and Seedscatter could hardly imagine them doing any real damage in a fight. Where did these cats come from, and why were they out here all alone? They were clearly young and inexperienced. His head was spinning with questions. Forgetting the crow, Seedscatter crouched lower, his ears pricked.

The rogues were on the move now, shooting glares at each other as they retreated into the grass. Seedscatter waited for a heartbeat before creeping after them, his whiskers twitching with an anxious eagerness. If he could bring back new information on the so-called clot, he would be able to make up for the deaths of his clanmates! He could rest easy knowing that FieldClan would have the upper paw.

The two cats had started talking once more, clearly bickering by their tone. Seedscatter slowed his pace, listening intently.

"They should change your name to heavy," Jinx stated, her tone snobbish. Though he couldn't see her, he could almost picture the twisted sneer she wore on her face. "Because of how horrible you are at stalking."

The tom hissed, but said nothing.

"Although I guess Furry is as good a name as any, considering how much of a hair-ball you are."

"Oh yeah?" Furry challenged, and Seedscatter had to bite back a laugh. What kind of a name was Furry? Where *had* these cats come from?

The stinging retorts between the two subsided as they wove through the grass, moving as if they had walked the trail thousands of times. Seedscatter couldn't imagine how they could worm their way home so easily without a clear path to follow. It would take him ages to find the camp again after this, so how did Jinx and Furry accomplish the task with such ease?

Seedscatter started to feel an unshakable sense of worry in his gut. If the clot cats already knew so much about the land, how long had they really been around, and how long would it be before they got tired of sharing it? Seedscatter shuddered and pushed on.

Soon, other scents mingled with Jinx's and Furry's. They were the same sour, unfamiliar smells, though they lacked any similarities beyond that. These cats weren't kin; they had no ties to one another besides the common goal of survival. Seedscatter couldn't image

what growing up in this environment would do to a cat.

Suddenly, the rogues ahead of him didn't seem like antagonists. He wondered how they would have fared had they grown up alongside Blackpaw and Nutpaw, with cats to lean on for support and a kithood that didn't leave them fighting for their lives. He felt a pang of sympathy before he washed it away with a fresh wave of adrenaline. He was close to their camp.

But suddenly, the two cats took a right, padding around the pool of scents to rest underneath a weathered old crab apple tree. They sat far apart, though they murmured to one another quietly. Seedscatter leaned in closer, very much aware of how close he was to so many dangerous cats. Still, he felt a prickle of relief. Would he be able to spy on so many cats without being detected by a single one? He was thankful that it had been these two.

"What do you think they'll do with Lucy?" That was Jinx, her voice cautiously indifferent, concealing whatever true feelings she carried. "I mean, she's expecting kits. You don't think Calico will be to harsh, do you?"

"It won't be up to Calico," Furry snorted, clearly not sharing the same concern. "She won't be bothered with that kind of stuff. Heckle will see to it that she's properly punished. It shouldn't be too much of a spectacle, not with him overseeing it. I'm sure we'll be entertained, though, so don't worry."

Jinx seemed worried, despite Furry's words. Hesitantly, she mewed, "You don't think Heckle will kill her, do you?"

Furry looked up from his tail, which he had been grooming absentmindedly. There was a cold edge to the look he gave his denmate. "Heckle will do whatever will prove to better the clot."

The discussion was clearly finished with Furry's statement. Jinx looked shaken, but she didn't argue any further than that.

Under the noonday sun, the field was hot and dry, even with Leaf-fall hanging over them. The grasses here were far too short to conceal Seedscatter any longer; the rogues' inexperience had done

him a lot of good so far, but he doubted he would have much luck beyond the blessing he had been handed. Silently, he crept away from the two cats. If he ever met in battle, he promised that he would go easy on them. Though, he thought with a sly smirk, he doubted the two young cats would do him the same favor. Either way, they had helped him today.

Seedscatter set his gaze on a stubby-looking tree that would be far enough away from the clot cats' camp that he would be out of their way. The pain in his paw pads from the distance he had covered was starting to affect him, and he didn't want to injure himself when so much was at stake.

When he had arrived at its trunk, he didn't hesitate to lay down in the crook of its roots. The wood was warm and dry against his fur, a soothing presence in the never-ending expanse of flat, empty land. He was alone - truly alone - for the first time in a long time. There were no kits, no responsibilities, and no prophesy. He had his own agenda to follow, and even that wasn't concrete. It was oddly soothing.

His eyes found the horizon as he soothed his cracked pads with long, slow licks. The shade of the tree was making him drowsy, and it was taking all of his will power to not fall asleep in the lazy warmth of the day.

This may be the last rest I get for a while, he thought languidly, curling his tail around his body. I *suppose a quick nap never hurt any cat.* Seedscatter let his head rest on his forepaws, ignoring the sense of foreboding that seemed to loom over him like a dark cloud. He refused to let it bother him. He wasn't going to fall prey to those emotions anymore.

a/n

i probably should have edited this more but oh well, have an extra long chapter, courtesy of my love for Jinx and Furry